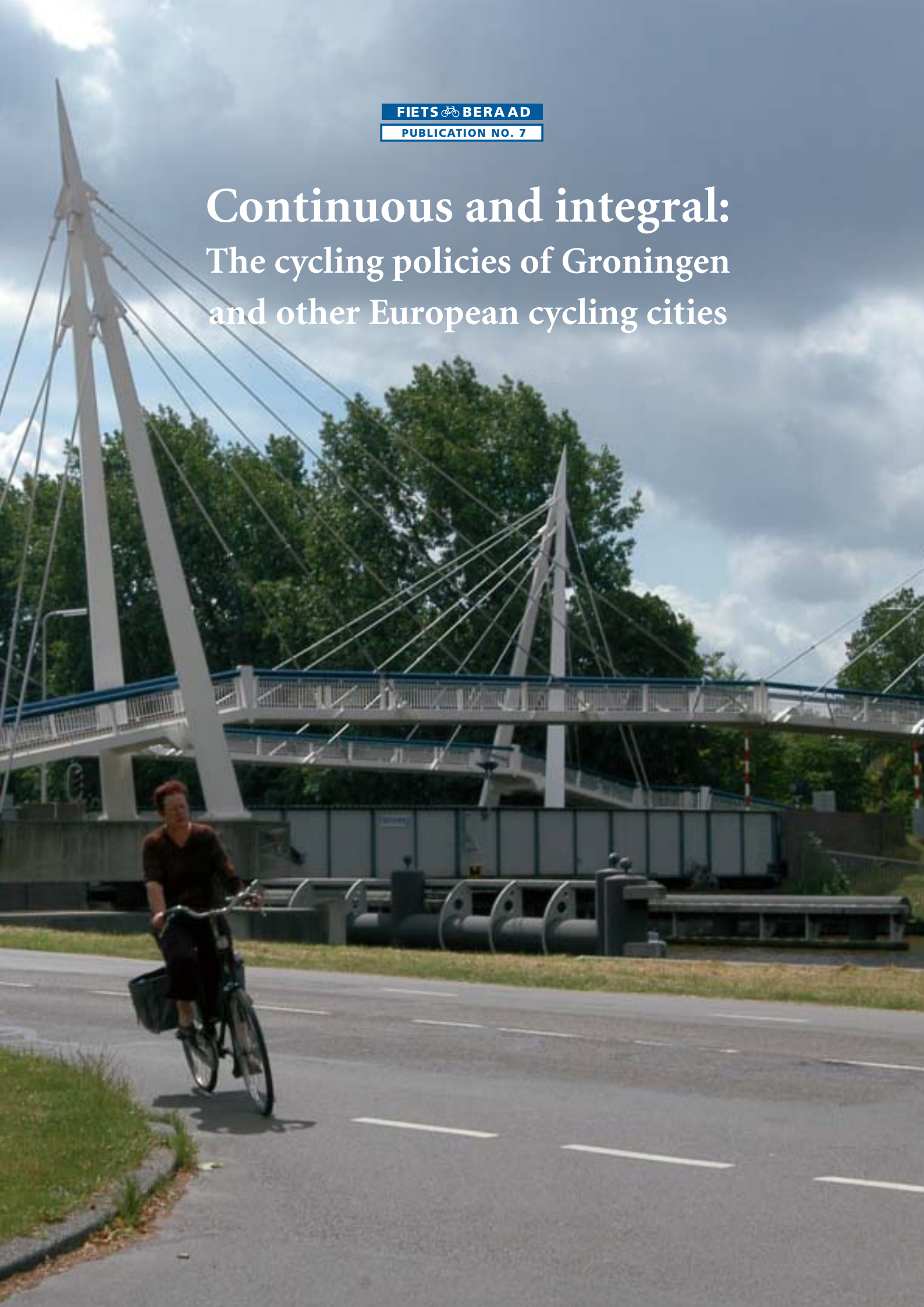


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Continuous and integral: The cycling policies of Groningen and other European cycling cities



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11. Ghent: promoting and sensitising

Relatively compact, flat, and students all around: Ghent has good conditions for intensive bicycle use. Since 1993 the municipality has conducted an active cycling policy that makes use of these conditions. And successfully so: people of Ghent grab their bikes. And because politicians and officials have been “thinking bike” Ghent traffic policy has been set in motion. This cycling policy has resulted in a local mobility policy considered Flanders’ most dynamic.

Ghent (230,000 inhabitants) lies where the Leie and Schelde rivers meet; a junction of waterways, railways and motorways in East Flanders. Its port, the metal and motor industry and the service sector - including many hospitals - are the pillars of its economy. 50,000 students at the university and three high schools and 60,000 school pupils mostly from the region make Ghent a city of knowledge and many young people. Cooperation between educational institutions and the business sector results in many starting, innovative enterprises. A shopping and entertainment centre, Ghent attracts many visitors from the region and also people coming from all over the country to its congresses and annual fair. Bicycles find their place in this lively city better and better. Right now the people of Ghent take the bicycle for 15% of their trips (walking 18%, public transport 8% and car 59%). Surely this was different once. Right until the '70s little attention was given to walking and cycling, or to the city's rich cultural-historical heritage either. Economic expansion and smooth car traffic flows topped the agenda. It was only in the late '80s, when the city was coagulating with cars, did a new awareness of public space arise. This resulted in the first urban innovations and the first car-free streets. Public space was now regarded as a whole, and urban construction and traffic plans were brought in line with each other.





The Ghent bicycle plan

In 1993, Frank Beke, alderman for traffic and public works, took the initiative to start up an active cycling policy. A daily cyclist, he knew the problems of cyclists and realised the beneficial effects that increased walking and cycling have on liveability, accessibility and safety. His initiatives gave him the nickname of 'Frank Bike' and pushed him on to become Mayor of Ghent. Voters appear to appreciate this working toward better mobility.

By the end of 1993 the municipal council approved of his bicycle plan named *Fietsplan Gent*. Its main objectives are: a secure bicycle infrastructure, a positive image surrounding the bicycle and car traffic management. The first rule that applies when implementing this plan is that each infrastructural change must benefit cyclists. For the period between 1994-2000 an annual budget was reserved amounting to € 1.24 million for infrastructure and € 170,000 for communication. This budget was intended to (co-)finance the realisation of a safe bicycle route network, a car-free city centre, 30 km/h areas all over the city, safe school surroundings and good bicycle parking facilities, increased attention to bicycle theft prevention and the renewed layout of the ring roads and major access roads. It also provided for better alignment between public transport and cycling and the creation of a bicycle culture, especially among school pupils, students and workers. Its widely-covering approach made it clear from the very beginning that this cycling policy should not be limited to pure 'bicycle measures'.

Mobility plans

The bicycle plan opened a new road for Ghent and its traffic policy. The municipal executive drastically amended its course and changed its approach of motorised traffic as well. First a city centre mobility plan was laid down (1997), followed by a plan covering the entire city (1998). This was followed in 1999 by a 'referendum for better and more public transport' and the first traffic liveability plans for staying areas. A committee was appointed for the promotion of an integral approach of all measures. It consists of employees of the relating municipi-

pal services, public transport companies, district, province, and so on. This committee must first approve of all measures before they can be implemented.

By now all streets in the 35-hectare historic city centre are either car-free or car-restricted, car parking space has been transformed into attractive staying areas and the city centre is now encircled by a parking route accommodating car traffic heading for the city centre. Coming from the ring and access roads and approaching the city centre, car drivers are faced with a decreasing traffic function, an increasing staying function, a stricter parking regime and higher parking charges.

Means



photo: Ursula Lehner-Lierz

It was completely new to Belgium when in 1993 the municipal executive appointed a bicycle official, **Erwin Stubbe**, who has been pioneering Ghent cycling policy ever since. In 1995 Stubbe received the support of an administrative assistant, added by a bicycle plan promoter in 1996. This was the birth of a real 'bicycle service'. It expanded into Mobility Service when in 1997 the city centre mobility plan also demanded inclusion of the other modes of transport. In 2003 the annual budget of this Service was € 5 million, of which 29% (ca. € 1,4 million) was reserved for bicycle traffic, 35% for traffic liveability and 25% for public transport.

Bicycle facilities

Of the four main bicycle routes originally planned, three were almost finished by the end of 2003 and one completely. The plans and partial realisation of four additional main routes have also been taken up now. Major construction works like bicycle tunnels and bridges take up most time, partly due to (financial) cooperation with other authorities. On some city ring and main access road stretches the number of car traffic lanes has been reduced from three to two to make wider cycle paths possible. Other measures concern reconstruction of crossings, or less drastic steps, like laying out bicycle (suggestion) lanes and placing road markings and signs.

A big step forward was bicycle traffic from both ends in one-way streets. These streets had long since been a serious impediment to cyclists, and Ghent and Antwerp both took the initiative in 1997 to amend their road traffic regulations. By now, one-way traffic can only be imposed on cyclists in Ghent in exceptional cases and on urgent grounds. "As we had prepared a good file we were able to open up more than 500 of our 700 one-way streets to cyclists in both directions within a short time; truly a success story," says **Yves de Baets**, communication assistant with the Mobility Service.

Like other cities, Ghent had always been critical of allowing cyclists in pedestrian areas. In 1997 cycling was allowed here as a pilot between six o'clock in the evening and nine o'clock in the morning, although firmly opposed by the pedestrian movement. Six months later an assessment proved that that there had hardly been any problems. From that moment cycling has been allowed at all hours, all over the full, 35-hectare pedestrian area.



photo: Stad Gent

Bicycle parking

From the very beginning the municipality and the police have been working together toward realising a structured approach of bicycle parking and preventing and combating bicycle theft. This is done by way of bicycle parking facilities and permanent and mobile parking facilities, rounding up stray bicycles and bicycle wrecks, returning retrieved, stolen bicycles to their owners via bicycle registration and promoting the use of proper bicycle locks. By now over 6,500 bicycle parking places have been realised in more than 200 locations and 4,000 near Sint Pieters railway station, 600 of these under surveillance. A 'parking team' ensures quick placement and maintenance and works continuously on optimisation of the facilities.

Since 1998 both permanent and mobile surveyed bicycle parking facilities have been placed in locations attracting many cyclists, or during events. Cyclists appreciate this. During the Ghent festivities, a ten-day street theatre and music festival, 4,500 cyclists made use of these free facilities in each of the past two years. At a cost of under € 1.20 per bicycle this is an extremely efficient measure, certainly when compared to the high costs of free public transport offered on certain shopping days and holidays. Ghent also has a bicycle watch consisting of seven assistants. They label bicycles left behind in the street and bicycle wrecks (almost 5,300 in 2002). Labelled bicycles still found after two weeks are transferred to a depot (over 2,330 in 2002). Whoever reports a bicycle theft with the police and can describe this bicycle in detail can come to the depot to see if it is there. 154 of the 400 Ghent citizens who took this trouble could return home with their own bicycles.



Cycle path boarding the water

Sensitising

Communication plays an important role in Ghent bicycle and mobility policy. First, emphasis was put on informing the population about the *Fietsplan Gent* and its objectives via newspapers and leaflets. In the next phase people's minds were gradually turned to a number of subjects: this is called sensitising. A number of events were organised for this purpose, like the Week of the Bicycle, the Week of the Soft Road User, the Week of Transport, Car-restricted School Days, a school rally, a bicycle bell concert for school pupils, bicycle tours and a cycle party for the disabled. Contributions were and are made to events organised by other organisations, a bicycle private project has been set up and fluorescent, reflecting clothing with the *Fietsplan Gent* logo is distributed. Calling up the people to make more frequent, daily use of bicycles was postponed until a sufficient amount of safe bicycle facilities had been provided. This appeared to be the correct approach, witness a survey conducted among cyclists. The average Ghent cyclist is not really after information; what matters to him especially is that safe and comfortable bicycle routes are realised. What he does like is the chance of venting his opinion, irritation or suggestions. An e-mail address specially reserved for this purpose receives 800 messages each month concerning bicycle and mobility policy. The cycling policy of Ghent radiates on to other cities. When in 1997 a two-day bicycle forum was organised in collaboration with Antwerp, various problems were put forward that cannot be solved at municipal level. This is due to legal obstructions: tax-related promotion, one-way roads, 30 km/h areas and so on. The bicycle forum received a lot of attention from the media and resulted in a foundation named Club of Belgian Cycling Cities. This now contains 26 municipalities. Most of the 'demands' of the past have been met by now.



Promotion

Three target groups receive special attention when promoting bicycle use:

- *Students*
Ghent offers students some tailor-made services to encourage them to use their bicycles. In 2002 for instance a bicycle rental project was started. Its objectives were: a sufficient amount of bicycles available, reducing the degree of bicycle theft and improving overall cycling safety. Bicycles offered for hire are not all of them new, there are also bicycles that have not been retrieved from the depot and that have been patched up. During the first year over 1,000 students hired a bicycle for € 5 a month. Little use was made of the possibility of parking bicycles in the bicycle depot during college-free periods.
- *School pupils*
The 2002 project named Safe School Surroundings is a structural approach by Ghent of home-school commuter traffic: schools are counselled by a consulting agency when assessing traffic safety in their school surroundings and when preparing a school transport plan. School routes are analysed, choices of modes of transport are studied and recommendations and suggestions for changing mobility behaviour are given to the school and the parents. Suggestions also concern integration of 'traffic' in education. The school transport plan can also be used for subsidy applications to the Flemish District for proposed measures. It is intended to give each school its turn in a few years to come.
- *Civil servants*
Civil servants of Ghent can use a section of the car parking garage of the administrative city centre. This has been converted into an electronically secured bicycle facility with its own entrance and equipped with dressing-rooms and showers. Employees can also use service bicycles and apply for a 'company bicycle', new or restored. Over 700 civil servants make use of this. When Belgium introduced the tax-free bicycle allowance in 1998 (€ 0.15/km, maximum 10 km/day) the city of Ghent instantly declared this applicable to civil servants who walk to the office. An estimated 50% of the civil servants actually makes use of this arrangement. Surveys prove, however, that this allowance must be far higher if civil servants are to change their mode of transport.

Effect

Although since 1977 the number of citizens in Ghent fell continuously, it has been growing slightly again since 1999. The ratio of vacant shops is clearly lower than elsewhere in Belgium. The number of visits to shops and the number of hotel nights show a very strong increase and also cafés and restaurants attract more visitors. These developments are an indication of the fact that a stay in this city has become more attractive to its inhabitants,

visitors and to companies. All this is reason enough for the executive to continue on its way and to work towards a further rise - 20% in 2006 - of the number of bicycle trips for instance. Yves de Baets: "It is one of Ghent's strongest points that everybody thinks 'bike' now. This speeds up and reinforces the process."

The traffic plan for the period between 2002-2007 (*Beleidsplan voor een anders-mobiel denken & doen*) of new alderman Karin Temmerman distinguishes among clear political choices in transparent words. This apparently is unusual and it shows: 'There is this clearly felt fear of calling a cat a cat.'

The plan elaborates six objectives:

- Ghent and its pedestrians: can we go a little better and quicker?
Focusing more intensely on sufficiently wide pavements.
- Ghent and its cyclists: can we go a little more safely? 20% more cyclists.
- Ghent and its public transport: can we double?
- Ghent and its cars: can we hold back a little?
- Ghent and its inhabitants: can we become slightly more liveable?
- Ghent and its parking problem: can we clear up a bit?

As regards bicycle facilities Ghent wishes to forge its good (main) bicycle routes together into an actual network soon, to realise its 'paper' street network. A few new bridges and tunnels have also been projected.

